

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA
ANDERSON/GREENWOOD DIVISION

Dominic M. Derricotte,)	Case No. 8:13-cv-02202-TLW-JDA
)	
Petitioner,)	
)	
v.)	<u>REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION</u>
)	<u>OF MAGISTRATE JUDGE</u>
Joseph McFadden, Warden of Lieber)	
Correctional Institution,)	
)	
Respondent.)	
)	

This matter is before the Court on Respondent's motion for summary judgment. [Doc. 11.] Petitioner, proceeding pro se, is a state prisoner who seeks relief under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. Pursuant to the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(B) and Local Civil Rule 73.02(B)(2)(c), D.S.C., this magistrate judge is authorized to review post-trial petitions for relief and submit findings and recommendations to the District Court.

Petitioner filed this Petition for writ of habeas corpus on August 8, 2013.¹ [Doc. 1.] On October 21, 2013, Respondent filed a motion for summary judgment and a return and memorandum. [Docs. 11, 12.] On October 22, 2013, the Court filed an Order pursuant to *Roseboro v. Garrison*, 528 F.2d 309 (4th Cir. 1975), advising Petitioner of the summary judgment procedure and of the possible consequences if he failed to adequately respond to the motion. [Doc. 13.] On November 25, 2013, Petitioner filed a response in opposition to Respondent's motion. [Doc. 16.] Having carefully considered the parties' submissions

¹A prisoner's pleading is considered filed at the moment it is delivered to prison authorities for forwarding to the court. See *Houston v. Lack*, 487 U.S. 266, 270 (1988). In this case, construing the filing date in the light most favorable to Petitioner, this action was filed on August 8, 2013. [Doc. 1-2 (envelope marked as received by prison mailroom on August 8, 2013).]

and the record in this case, the Court recommends that Respondent's motion for summary judgment be granted and the Petition be denied.

BACKGROUND

Petitioner is presently confined at the Lieber Correctional Institution of the South Carolina Department of Corrections, pursuant to orders of commitment of the Charleston County Clerk of Court. [Doc. 1 at 1.] In March 2007, Petitioner was indicted for murder and armed robbery. [App. 539, 542.²] On January 7, 2008, represented by Rodney Davis and Mary Ford ("Davis" and "Ford"), Petitioner proceeded to trial. [App. 1–537.] On October 12, 2005, the jury returned its verdict, finding Petitioner guilty as indicted. [App. 513.] Petitioner was sentenced to life without parole for the murder charge and thirty years for the armed robbery charge. [App. 535–36.]

Direct Appeal

Petitioner timely filed a notice of appeal. On April 2, 2009, Joseph L. Savitz of the South Carolina Commission on Indigent Defense filed an *Anders* brief³ on Petitioner's behalf, as well as a petition to be relieved as counsel. [Doc. 12-5.] The brief raised the following claim:

The trial judge committed reversible error by allowing two State's witnesses to testify that the victim referred to Derricotte as "Creepy Dominic," as this evidence was either unduly prejudicial under Rule 403, SCRE, or improperly placed his character in issue in violation of Rule 404, SCRE.

²The Appendix can be found at Docket Entry Numbers 12-1 through 12-4.

³A brief filed pursuant to *Anders v. California*, 386 U.S. 738 (1967), effectively concedes the appeal lacks a meritorious claim.

[*Id.* at 4.] Petitioner was informed of his right to file a pro se brief [Doc. 12-10], and he subsequently filed a pro se brief, which is referenced in a letter from the Clerk of the South Carolina Court of Appeals confirming receipt of the brief. [Doc. 12-11]. On February 3, 2010, the South Carolina Court of Appeals issued a per curiam opinion dismissing Petitioner's appeal and granting his appellate counsel's motion to be relieved. [Doc. 12-12.] Petitioner did not seek rehearing and remittitur was issued on February 19, 2010. [Doc. 12-13.]

PCR Proceedings

PCR Application

Petitioner, proceeding pro se, filed an application for post-conviction relief ("PCR") on February 7, 2011. [App. 544–57.] Petitioner raised the following grounds for relief, quoted substantially verbatim:

- (a) Trial counsel rendered ineffective assistance of counsel by not investigating state's key witness' firearm, and presenting ballistics on above mentioned weapon as this evidence was material and could have le[a]d jury to find defendant's innocent;
- (b) State's failure to investigate state's own key witness in murder must be a violation of both due process and equal protection law;
- (c) Where Defendant claimed not to be present at the time of crime; Defendant's constitutional rights have been violated by the State's failure to produce a photo line up, prior to in court show up. Where it is a known fact that such show up[s] are highly prejudicial;
- (d) trial counsel was rendered ineffective for not addressing this issue of identification as well as other issues of identification;

(e) the totality of events within this case as analyzed in a free form argument.

[App. 551.]

A hearing was held on the PCR application on July 19, 2011, and Petitioner was represented at the hearing by Charles T. Brooks. [App. 562–587.] Testimony was received from Petitioner and Davis. [*Id.*] On August 15, 2011, the PCR court filed an order denying and dismissing the application with prejudice. [App. 589–95.]

A notice of appeal was timely filed and served. On April 5, 2012, Kathrine H. Hudgins (“Hudgins”) of the South Carolina Commission on Indigent Defense filed a *Johnson* petition for writ of certiorari on Petitioner’s behalf in the South Carolina Supreme Court, seeking review of the PCR court’s decision and raising the following issue:

Was PCR counsel ineffective in failing to raise ineffective assistance of appellate counsel for failing to challenge the trial judge’s error in refusing to suppress a statement given during a custodial interrogation after petitioner was mirandized and invoked his right to counsel?

[Doc. 12-14 at 3.] Hudgins also requested to be relieved as counsel pursuant to *Johnson v. State*, 294 S.E.3d 201 (1988), representing to the court that she found Petitioner’s appeal to be without merit. [*Id.* at 12.] Petitioner also filed his own pro se petition on April 23, 2012. [Doc. 12-17.] On July 8, 2013, the South Carolina Court of Appeals denied the petition for writ of certiorari. [Doc. 12-18.] Remittitur issued on July 23, 2013. [Doc. 12-19.]

Petition for Writ of Habeas Corpus

As stated, Petitioner filed this Petition for writ of habeas corpus on August 8, 2013, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2254. [Doc. 1.] Petitioner asserts the following grounds for relief, quoted substantially verbatim:

Ground One: Ineffective assistance of PCR counsel

Supporting Facts: PCR counsel was ineffective in failing to raise ineffective assistance of appellate counsel for failing to challenge trial judge's error in refusing to suppress a statement given during custodial interrogation after Petitioner was mirandized and invoked his right to counsel.

Ground Two: Ineffective assistance of trial counsel on failure to investigate state's key witness firearm.

Supporting Facts: Trial counsel failed to investigate possible murder weapon which could've exonerated Derricotte; w[h]ere counsel believed the absence of such evidence was in his best interest.

[Doc. 1.]

APPLICABLE LAW

Liberal Construction of Pro Se Petition

Petitioner brought this action *pro se*, which requires the Court to liberally construe his pleadings. *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972) (per curiam); *Loe v. Armistead*, 582 F.2d 1291, 1295 (4th Cir. 1978); *Gordon v. Leeke*, 574 F.2d 1147, 1151 (4th Cir. 1978). Pro se pleadings are held to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys. *Haines*, 404 U.S. at 520. Even under this less stringent standard, however, the pro se petition is still subject to summary

dismissal. *Id.* at 520–21. The mandated liberal construction means only that if the court can reasonably read the pleadings to state a valid claim on which the petitioner could prevail, it should do so. *Barnett v. Hargett*, 174 F.3d 1128, 1133 (10th Cir. 1999). A court may not construct the petitioner’s legal arguments for him. *Small v. Endicott*, 998 F.2d 411, 417–18 (7th Cir. 1993). Nor should a court “conjure up questions never squarely presented.” *Beaudett v. City of Hampton*, 775 F.2d 1274, 1278 (4th Cir. 1985).

Summary Judgment Standard

Rule 56 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure states, as to a party who has moved for summary judgment:

The court shall grant summary judgment if the movant shows that there is no genuine dispute as to any material fact and the movant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.

Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(a). A fact is “material” if proof of its existence or non-existence would affect disposition of the case under applicable law. *Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc.*, 477 U.S. 242, 248 (1986). An issue of material fact is “genuine” if the evidence offered is such that a reasonable jury might return a verdict for the non-movant. *Id.* at 257. When determining whether a genuine issue has been raised, the court must construe all inferences and ambiguities against the movant and in favor of the non-moving party. *United States v. Diebold, Inc.*, 369 U.S. 654, 655 (1962).

The party seeking summary judgment shoulders the initial burden of demonstrating to the court that there is no genuine issue of material fact. *Celotex Corp. v. Catrett*, 477 U.S. 317, 323 (1986). Once the movant has made this threshold demonstration, the non-moving party, to survive the motion for summary judgment, may not rest on the

allegations averred in his pleadings. *Id.* at 324. Rather, the non-moving party must demonstrate specific, material facts exist that give rise to a genuine issue. *Id.* Under this standard, the existence of a mere scintilla of evidence in support of the non-movant's position is insufficient to withstand the summary judgment motion. *Anderson*, 477 U.S. at 252. Likewise, conclusory allegations or denials, without more, are insufficient to preclude granting the summary judgment motion. *Ross v. Commc'ns Satellite Corp.*, 759 F.2d 355, 365 (4th Cir. 1985), *overruled on other grounds*, 490 U.S. 228 (1989). "Only disputes over facts that might affect the outcome of the suit under the governing law will properly preclude the entry of summary judgment. Factual disputes that are irrelevant or unnecessary will not be counted." *Anderson*, 477 U.S. at 248. Further, Rule 56 provides in pertinent part:

A party asserting that a fact cannot be or is genuinely disputed must support the assertion by:

(A) citing to particular parts of materials in the record, including depositions, documents, electronically stored information, affidavits or declarations, stipulations (including those made for purposes of the motion only), admissions, interrogatory answers, or other materials; or

(B) showing that the materials cited do not establish the absence or presence of a genuine dispute, or that an adverse party cannot produce admissible evidence to support the fact.

Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(c)(1). Accordingly, when Rule 56(c) has shifted the burden of proof to the non-movant, he must produce existence of a factual dispute on every element essential to his action that he bears the burden of adducing at a trial on the merits.

Habeas Corpus

Generally

Because Petitioner filed his petition after the effective date of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (“AEDPA”), review of his claims is governed by 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d), as amended. *Lindh v. Murphy*, 521 U.S. 320 (1997); *Breard v. Pruett*, 134 F.3d 615 (4th Cir. 1998). Under the AEDPA, federal courts may not grant habeas corpus relief unless the underlying state adjudication

(1) resulted in a decision that was contrary to, or involved an unreasonable application of, clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court of the United States; or

(2) resulted in a decision that was based on an unreasonable determination of the facts in light of the evidence presented in the State court proceeding.

28 U.S.C. § 2254(d). “[A] federal habeas court may not issue the writ simply because that court concludes in its independent judgment that the relevant state-court decision applied clearly established federal law erroneously or incorrectly. Rather, that application must also be unreasonable.” *Williams v. Taylor*, 529 U.S. 362, 410 (2000). “A state court’s determination that a claim lacks merit precludes federal habeas relief so long as ‘fairminded jurists could disagree’ on the correctness of the state court’s decision,” and “even a strong case for relief does not mean the state court’s contrary conclusion was unreasonable.” *Harrington v. Richter*, 131 S.Ct. 770, 786 (2011). Moreover, state court factual determinations are presumed to be correct, and the petitioner has the burden of rebutting this presumption by clear and convincing evidence. 28 U.S.C. § 2254(e)(1).

Procedural Bar

Federal law establishes this Court's jurisdiction over habeas corpus petitions. 28 U.S.C. § 2254. This statute permits relief when a person "is in custody in violation of the Constitution or laws or treaties of the United States" and requires that a petitioner present his claim to the state's highest court with authority to decide the issue before the federal court will consider the claim. *Id.* The separate but related theories of exhaustion and procedural bypass operate to require a habeas petitioner to first submit his claims for relief to the state courts. A habeas corpus petition filed in this Court before the petitioner has appropriately exhausted available state-court remedies or has otherwise bypassed seeking relief in the state courts will be dismissed absent unusual circumstances detailed below.

Exhaustion

Section 2254 contains the requirement of exhausting state court remedies and provides as follows:

- (b) (1) An application for a writ of habeas corpus on behalf of a person in custody pursuant to the judgment of a State court shall not be granted unless it appears that—
 - (A) the applicant has exhausted the remedies available in the courts of the State; or
 - (B) (i) there is an absence of available State corrective process; or
 - (ii) circumstances exist that render such process ineffective to protect the rights of the applicant.
- (2) An application for a writ of habeas corpus may be denied on the merits, notwithstanding the failure of the

applicant to exhaust the remedies available in the courts of the State.

(3) A State shall not be deemed to have waived the exhaustion requirement or be estopped from reliance upon the requirement unless the State, through counsel, expressly waives the requirement.

(c) An applicant shall not be deemed to have exhausted the remedies available in the courts of the State, within the meaning of this section, if he has the right under the law of the State to raise, by any available procedure, the question presented.

28 U.S.C. § 2254. The statute requires that, before seeking habeas corpus relief, the petitioner first must exhaust his state court remedies. *Id.* § 2254(b)(1)(A). “To satisfy the exhaustion requirement, a habeas petitioner must present his claims to the state’s highest court.” *Matthews v. Evatt*, 105 F.3d 907, 911 (4th Cir. 1997). Thus, a federal court may consider only those issues that have been properly presented to the highest state court with jurisdiction to decide them.

In South Carolina, a person in custody has two primary means of attacking the validity of his conviction: (1) through a direct appeal, or (2) by filing an application for PCR. State law requires that all grounds for relief be stated in the direct appeal or PCR application. S.C. App. Ct. R. 203; S.C. Code Ann. § 17-27-90; *Blakeley v. Rabon*, 221 S.E.2d 767, 770 (S.C. 1976). If the PCR court fails to address a claim as required by S.C. Code Ann. § 17-27-80, counsel for the applicant must make a motion to alter or amend the judgment. S.C. R. Civ. P. 59(e). Failure to do so will result in the application of a procedural bar to that claim by the South Carolina Supreme Court. *Marlar v. State*, 653

S.E.2d 266 (S.C. 2007).⁴ Further, strict time deadlines govern direct appeal and the filing of a PCR application in the South Carolina courts. For direct appeal, a notice of appeal must be filed and served on all respondents within ten days after the sentence is imposed or after receiving written notice of entry of the order or judgment. S.C. App. Ct. R. 203(b)(2), (d)(1)(B). A PCR application must be filed within one year of judgment, or if there is an appeal, within one year of the appellate court decision. S.C. Code Ann. § 17-27-45(A).

If any avenue of state relief is still available, the petitioner must proceed through the state courts before requesting a writ of habeas corpus in the federal courts. *Richardson v. Turner*, 716 F.2d 1059, 1062 (4th Cir. 1983); *Patterson v. Leeke*, 556 F.2d 1168 (4th Cir. 1977). Therefore, in a federal petition for habeas relief, a petitioner may present only those issues that were presented to the highest South Carolina court through direct appeal or through an appeal from the denial of a PCR application, regardless of whether the court actually reached the merits of the claim.⁵

⁴In *Bostick v. Stevenson*, 589 F.3d 160 (4th Cir. 2009), the Fourth Circuit found that, prior to the Supreme Court of South Carolina's November 5, 2007 decision in *Marlar*, South Carolina courts had not uniformly and strictly enforced the failure to file a motion pursuant to Rule 59(e) as a procedural bar. 589 F.3d at 162–65. Accordingly, for matters in which there was a PCR ruling prior to November 5, 2007, the Court will not consider any failure to raise issues pursuant to Rule 59(e) to effect a procedural bar.

⁵In *State v. McKennedy*, the South Carolina Supreme Court reiterated that a petition for discretionary review to the South Carolina Supreme Court in criminal and post-conviction cases is outside South Carolina's standard review process, and therefore, "petitions for rehearing and certiorari following an adverse Court of Appeals' decision are not required in order to exhaust all available state remedies." 559 S.E.2d 850, 854 (S.C. 2002) (citing *In re Exhaustion of State Remedies in Criminal and Post-Conviction Relief Cases*, 471 S.E.2d 454 (S.C. 1990)).

Procedural Bypass

Procedural bypass, sometimes referred to as procedural bar or procedural default, is the doctrine applied when a petitioner seeks habeas corpus relief based on an issue he failed to raise at the appropriate time in state court, removing any further means of bringing that issue before the state courts. In such a situation, the petitioner has bypassed his state remedies and, as such, is procedurally barred from raising the issue in his federal habeas petition. See *Smith v. Murray*, 477 U.S. 527, 533 (1986). The United States Supreme Court has stated that the procedural bypass of a constitutional claim in earlier state proceedings forecloses consideration by the federal courts. See *id.* Bypass can occur at any level of the state proceedings if a state has procedural rules that bar its courts from considering claims not raised in a timely fashion. *Id.*

The Supreme Court of South Carolina will refuse to consider claims raised in a second appeal that could have been raised at an earlier time. See S.C. Code Ann. § 17-27-90; *Aice v. State*, 409 S.E.2d 392, 394 (S.C. 1991). Further, if a prisoner has failed to file a direct appeal or a PCR application and the deadlines for filing have passed, he is barred from proceeding in state court. S.C. App. Ct. R. 203(d)(3) & 243. If the state courts have applied a procedural bar to a claim because of an earlier default in the state courts, the federal court honors that bar. See *Reed v. Ross*, 468 U.S. 1, 11 (1984); see also *Kornahrens v. Evatt*, 66 F.3d 1350, 1357 (4th Cir. 1995). As the United States Supreme Court explained:

[State procedural rules promote] not only the accuracy and efficiency of judicial decisions, but also the finality of those decisions, by forcing the defendant to litigate all of his claims together, as quickly after trial as the docket will allow, and

while the attention of the appellate court is focused on his case.

Reed, 468 U.S. at 10–11.

However, if a federal habeas petitioner can show both (1) “‘cause’ for noncompliance with the state rule” and (2) “‘actual prejudice resulting from the alleged constitutional violation[.]’” the federal court may consider the claim. *Smith*, 477 U.S. at 533 (quoting *Wainwright v. Sykes*, 433 U.S. 72, 84 (1977)). When a petitioner has failed to comply with state procedural requirements and cannot make the required showing of cause and prejudice, the federal courts generally decline to hear the claim. *Murray v. Carrier*, 477 U.S. 478, 496 (1986). Further, if the petitioner does not raise cause and prejudice, the court need not consider the defaulted claim. See *Kornahrens*, 66 F.3d at 1363.

If a federal habeas petitioner has failed to raise a claim in state court and is precluded by state rules from returning to state court to raise the issue, he has procedurally bypassed his opportunity for relief in the state courts and in federal court. *Coleman v. Thompson*, 501 U.S. 722, 731–32 (1991). Absent a showing of cause and actual prejudice, a federal court is barred from considering the claim. *Sykes*, 433 U.S. at 87. In such an instance, the exhaustion requirement is technically met, and the rules of procedural bar apply. *Teague v. Lane*, 489 U.S. 288, 297–98 (1989); *Matthews*, 105 F.3d at 915 (citing *Coleman*, 501 U.S. at 735 n.1; *Teague*, 489 U.S. at 297–98; *George v. Angelone*, 100 F.3d 353, 363 (4th Cir. 1996); *Bassette v. Thompson*, 915 F.2d 932, 937 (4th Cir. 1990)).

Cause and Actual Prejudice

Because the requirement of exhaustion is not jurisdictional, this Court may consider claims that have not been presented to the South Carolina Supreme Court in limited circumstances—where a petitioner shows sufficient cause for failure to raise the claim and actual prejudice resulting from the failure or where a “fundamental miscarriage of justice” has occurred. *Coleman*, 501 U.S. at 750; *Carrier*, 477 U.S. at 495–96. A petitioner may prove cause if he can demonstrate ineffective assistance of counsel relating to the default, show an external factor hindered compliance with the state procedural rule, or demonstrate the novelty of a particular claim, where the novelty of the constitutional claim is such that its legal basis is not reasonably available to the petitioner’s counsel. *Id.* at 487–89; *Reed*, 468 U.S. at 16. Absent a showing of “cause,” the court is not required to consider “actual prejudice.” *Turner v. Jabe*, 58 F.3d 924, 931 (4th Cir. 1995). However, if a petitioner demonstrates sufficient cause, he must also show actual prejudice to excuse a default. *Carrier*, 477 U.S. at 492. To show actual prejudice, the petitioner must demonstrate more than plain error. *Engle v. Isaac*, 456 U.S. 107, 134–35 (1982).

As an alternative to demonstrating cause for failure to raise the claim, the petitioner must show a miscarriage of justice. To demonstrate a miscarriage of justice, the petitioner must show he is actually innocent. See *Carrier*, 477 U.S. at 496 (holding a fundamental miscarriage of justice occurs only in extraordinary cases, “where a constitutional violation has probably resulted in the conviction of someone who is actually innocent”). Actual innocence is defined as factual innocence, not legal innocence. *Bousley v. United States*,

523 U.S. 614, 623 (1998). To pass through this actual innocence standard, the petitioner's case must be truly extraordinary. *Carrier*, 477 U.S. at 496.

DISCUSSION

Ground One

In Ground One, Petitioner raises a claim of ineffective assistance of PCR counsel. [Doc. 1 at 5.] However, “[t]he ineffectiveness or incompetence of counsel during Federal or State collateral post-conviction proceedings shall not be a ground for relief in a proceeding arising under section 2254.” 28 U.S.C. § 2254(i); *see also Martinez v. Ryan*, 132 S. Ct. 1309, 1315 & 1320 (2012) (stating that, “while § 2254(i) precludes [a petitioner] from relying on the ineffectiveness of his postconviction attorney as a ‘ground for relief,’ it does not stop [a petitioner] from using it to establish ‘cause’” and holding that a petitioner may establish cause for defaulting an ineffective assistance of trial counsel claim by demonstrating his postconviction attorney was ineffective). Therefore, Petitioner is not entitled to federal habeas relief as to Ground One because it is not a cognizable federal habeas claim.

Ground Two

Merits of the Ineffective Assistance of Counsel Claim

As an initial matter, Respondent concedes that Ground Two is not procedurally barred and is timely under the AEDPA. [Doc. 12 at 19.] Therefore, the Court proceeds to consider the merits of this ground. Under the AEDPA, a federal court may not grant habeas relief unless the underlying state court decision was contrary to or an unreasonable application of federal law, as determined by the United States Supreme Court, 28 U.S.C.

§ 2254(d)(1), or based on an unreasonable determination of the facts before the court, *id.* § 2254(d)(2). The Supreme Court has held the “contrary to” and “unreasonable application of” clauses present two different avenues for relief. *Williams*, 529 U.S. at 405 (“The Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit properly accorded both the ‘contrary to’ and ‘unreasonable application’ clauses independent meaning.”). The Court stated there are two instances when a state court decision will be contrary to Supreme Court precedent:

A state-court decision will certainly be contrary to our clearly established precedent if the state court applies a rule that contradicts the governing law set forth in our cases. . . . A state-court decision will also be contrary to this Court’s clearly established precedent if the state court confronts a set of facts that are materially indistinguishable from a decision of this Court and nevertheless arrives at a result different from our precedent.

Id. at 405–06. On the other hand, a state court decision is an unreasonable application of Supreme Court precedent when the decision “correctly identifies the governing legal rule but applies it unreasonably to the facts of a particular prisoner’s case.” *Id.* at 407–08; see also *Richter*, 131 S. Ct. at 786 (“Under § 2254(d), a habeas court must determine what arguments or theories supported or, as here, could have supported, the state court’s decision; and then it must ask whether it is possible fairminded jurists could disagree that those arguments or theories are inconsistent with the holding in a prior decision of this Court. . . . It bears repeating that even a strong case for relief does not mean the state court’s contrary conclusion was unreasonable.”). Finally, a decision cannot be contrary to or an unreasonable application of Supreme Court precedent unless applicable Supreme Court precedent exists; without applicable Supreme Court precedent, there is no habeas relief for petitioners. *Virsnieks v. Smith*, 521 F.3d 707, 716 (7th Cir. 2008) (citing *Lockhart*

v. Chandler, 446 F.3d 721, 724 (7th Cir.2006); *Simpson v. Battaglia*, 458 F.3d 585, 597 (7th Cir.2006)); see *Bustos v. White*, 521 F.3d 321, 325 (4th Cir. 2008).

When evaluating a habeas petition based on a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel, assuming the state court applied the correct legal standard—the Supreme Court’s holdings in *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668 (1984)—“[t]he pivotal question is whether the state court’s application of the *Strickland* standard was unreasonable. This is different from asking whether defense counsel’s performance fell below *Strickland*’s standard.”⁶ *Richter*, 131 S. Ct. at 785. “A state court must be granted a deference and latitude that are not in operation when the case involves review under the *Strickland* standard itself.” *Id.*; see also *Yarborough v. Gentry*, 540 U.S. 1, 6 (2003) (stating judicial review of counsel’s performance is “doubly deferential when it is conducted through the lens of federal habeas”). Even if a state court decision questionably constitutes an unreasonable application of federal law, the “state court’s determination that a claim lacks merit precludes federal habeas relief so long as ‘fairminded jurists could disagree’ on the correctness of the state court’s decision.” *Richter*, 131 S. Ct. at 786 (quoting *Yarborough v. Alvarado*, 541 U.S. 652, 664 (2004)). Thus, in such situations, the habeas court must determine whether it is possible for fairminded jurists to disagree that the arguments or

⁶In *Strickland*, the Supreme Court established that to challenge a conviction based on ineffective assistance of counsel, a prisoner must prove two elements: (1) his counsel was deficient in his representation and (2) he was prejudiced as a result. 466 U.S. at 687. To satisfy the first prong, a prisoner must show that “counsel’s representation fell below an objective standard of reasonableness.” *Id.* at 688. To satisfy the second prong, a prisoner must show that “there is a reasonable probability that, but for counsel’s unprofessional errors, the result of the proceeding would have been different.” *Id.* at 692. The Supreme Court has cautioned that “[j]udicial scrutiny of counsel’s performance must be highly deferential,” and “[b]ecause of the difficulties inherent in making the evaluation, a court must indulge a strong presumption that counsel’s conduct falls within the wide range of reasonable professional assistance.” *Id.* at 689.

theories supporting the state court's decision are inconsistent with Supreme Court precedent. *Id.*

Here, the PCR court held an evidentiary hearing and outlined a factual basis for declining to find that trial counsel's representation fell below the *Strickland* and applicable state law standards. [App. 562–88 (evidentiary hearing), App. 589–95 (PCR court's findings of fact, conclusions of law, and analysis).] The PCR court made the following findings as to Ground Two:

The [Petitioner] testified that the key witness, Alvin Story, had a firearm that was never checked for ballistics. He contended that counsel should have investigated Mr. Story's firearm and made a motion to have the gun checked. [Petitioner] testified that counsel failed to object to the photo lineup being shown to the witnesses. He also testified that he was the only person fingerprinted and that the area at the restaurant where the fingerprints were taken was not a restricted area. Trial counsel, Rodney Davis, Esquire, testified that [Petitioner's] defense was that he did not commit these crimes and was not present at the scene of the crimes. He testified that [Petitioner] was employed at the restaurant where the crimes occurred, and [Petitioner] had worked earlier in the night. He asserted that several eye witnesses testified that they saw [Petitioner] in the parking lot after he finished his shift. Counsel testified that he was able to cross-examine all the witness[es] who testified that they saw [Petitioner] in the parking lot. Counsel testified that he looked into the State's evidence and Mr. Story's firearm. He contended that he did not move to have Mr. Story's weapon tested because he believed the absence of evidence was [Petitioner's] best argument. He asserted that he did not believe testing the weapon would have been helpful to [Petitioner's] case. Counsel testified that he did not recall any issues with the presentation of the photo lineup to the witnesses.

[App. 591.] In considering these facts and applying *Strickland*, the PCR court found Davis' testimony to be credible. [*Id.* at 592.] The PCR court found that "counsel is a trial practitioner who has extensive experience in the trial of serious offenses. Counsel

conferred with the [Petitioner] on several occasions.” [*Id.*] The court concluded that Petitioner failed to meet his burden of proof as to the ineffective assistance of counsel claim.

This Court finds that counsel made a valid strategic decision not to move to have Alvin Story’s firearm tested. There is a strong presumption that counsel rendered adequate assistance and exercised reasonable professional judgment in making all significant decisions in a case. *Caprood v. State*, 338 S.C. 103, 109, 525 S.E.2d 514, 517 (2000). Where trial counsel articulates a valid reason for employing a certain trial strategy, such conduct will not be deemed ineffective assistance of counsel. *Roseboro v. State*, 317 S.C. 292, 294, 454 S.E.2d 312, 313 (1995). Counsel’s strategy will be reviewed under “an objective standard of reasonableness.” *Ingle v. State*, 348 S.C. 467, 470, 560 S.E.2d 401, 402 (2002). Here, counsel testified that he believed the absence of evidence was [Petitioner’s] best argument. The Court agrees with trial counsel. [Petitioner’s] position at trial was that he was not present when these crimes were committed; thus, the lack of evidence presented by the State was his best defense.

[*Id.* at 593.] Accordingly, the PCR court considered Petitioner’s argument that his trial counsel should have had the gun tested but found Petitioner had failed to state a claim pursuant to *Strickland* because trial counsel made a tactical decision to focus on the state’s lack of evidence. [*Id.*]

Upon review, the Court determines the PCR court’s denial of Petitioner’s ineffective assistance claim was neither contrary to nor an unreasonable application of applicable Supreme Court precedent. First, the PCR court applied the *Strickland* standard, which is the applicable Supreme Court precedent. Second, the record fails to demonstrate the PCR court confronted a set of facts that were materially indistinguishable from those considered in a decision of the Supreme Court but arrived at a result different from the Supreme Court

precedent. Thus, the Court concludes the PCR court's decision was not contrary to applicable Supreme Court precedent.

Further, the record supports the PCR court's decision, which demonstrates the PCR court's decision was not an unreasonable application of *Strickland*. Trial counsel brought out on cross examination of Mr. Story that Mr. Story owned a fire arm. [App. 180, 580–81.] Counsel also elicited from Story that Story was familiar with the type of gun that Story testified Petitioner used during the robbery because, it was inferred, Story owned a similar weapon. [*Id.*] Additionally, the record supports counsel's determination that the most prudent strategy was to emphasize the lack of evidence with regard to the firearm, because the other evidence against Petitioner (including eyewitnesses and fingerprints) was strong. [App. 98; 408–19.] Thus, the record supports the PCR court's determination that Petitioner failed to demonstrate either prong of the *Strickland* standard. Therefore, the Court concludes the PCR court's decision was not contrary to or an unreasonable application of applicable Supreme Court precedent, and Petitioner is not entitled to habeas corpus relief based on Ground Two.

CONCLUSION

Wherefore, based upon the foregoing, the Court recommends Respondent's motion for summary judgment be GRANTED and the Petition be DENIED.

IT IS SO RECOMMENDED.

s/Jacquelyn D. Austin
United States Magistrate Judge

May 27, 2014
Greenville, South Carolina